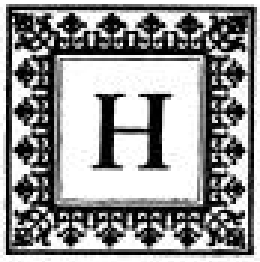
Class

BY VALMA CLARK
Author of "The Director's Brother," "Candlelight Inn," etc.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMES REYNOLDS



HIS impression of the house was not favorable. His first encounter with its mistress was outside anything in his experience of interviews. The angular-looking maid had simply lifted her voice and bellowed: "Miss Tait!"

"Aye, aye!" came the response from overhead, and Bloomer, gazing roofward, saw a little, pale, young-old face with a wispy ruffling of light-brown hair peering down through the cherry boughs at him. "You're answering my advertisement for a chauffeur?"

"Yes, madam."

The maid had brusquely withdrawn. Bloomer stood aside, and endeavored not to watch. She achieved the crest of the roof, and then she sat and slid—simply slid—down its sharp slope.

On solid ground, Miss Tait made an easy recovery from her awkward feat. She showed no embarrassment—nothing but an entirely natural poise and composure. She stood, a little nondescript person with a dowdy girlishness, and she lifted her eyes to Bloomer's and considered him. "What is your name?"

"Charles Bloomer," he replied.

"You understand that the position is very temporary? For just a month or six weeks?"

"Yes, madam."

It was not his type of place. The little rusty shingle house in its rank smother of flowers and its backwater location was posed, in his vision, against the sweeping and gravelled estates of adjacent gay resorts—magnificent driveways, specifically private, which Bloomer, in all the glory of full livery and the most *de luxe* motor-cars in the market, was accustomed to take with a proprietary flourish. . . . The little, dim, cramped hallway was set against the grilled grandeur of more adequate front entrances. . . .

With his record and his references, heaven knows there were plenty of first-class positions open to him. But Bloomer's ambition had long been centred upon Mrs. Llewelyn Smedburg—*the* Mrs. Smedburg, wife of the big oilman, with half a dozen cars of assorted extravagant makes in her garage. The lady was at present in Europe. She would return at the end of the month, and Bloomer was confident that she would then take him on. Meantime, this little temporary job would fill the gap.

"In here, please." The room was a frazzle of papers blowing in a light wind. Miss Tait fluttered here and there gathering them up. "I do a bit of writing. I'm restless when I'm not doing it, but—I should be taking a complete holiday. This 'red-light district' ruling—what's your opinion—?" She had her back turned to Bloomer's horrified stiffening. "But no, never mind," she sighed; "don't start me."

She dropped into a chair, gave him her complete attention. Her eyes . . . they were both gay and gentle, with an intelligence of understanding, a sympathy almost fluid. Bloomer felt that she was sizing him up, and he was confident. He stood before her, a splendid specimen of stalwart manhood. He knew just how far his male beauty was an asset and how far it was a detriment; he understood that it got him jobs, and that it sometimes lost him jobs. The architecture of body—it was a figure to enhance a uniform, such a figure as occurs most frequently among chorus men and chauffeurs—overshadowed the face.

But the face, too, was significant. He should have been a cattle-red blond, but was, instead, a brunet. Dark hair, dark eyes, supercilious dark eyebrows. After the first shock, his darkness seemed the

only right thing; it gave accent to his disdain. And it interfered in no way with the scheme of solid, flawless male beauty. Nose, mouth, cleft chin—his features were all regular and quite perfect. His expression was fixed in conscious superiority, invincible correctness.

"You are married?"

"No, madam."

"And why not?" she wondered, more to herself than to him.

He said: "I've never met a woman who wouldn't rough up my plans."

"Ah, you are ambitious!"

He waited. This personal interest in him was gratifying—but why didn't she come to the point? Since she showed no indication of interviewing him, Bloomer interviewed her: "What car?"

"A Frankard," she replied. (It was better than he had hoped.)

"Six, or eight?"

"Which?" she wondered.

"Cylinders," he snapped.

She hadn't counted; really, she knew very little about machinery. He'd have to look for himself.

To his stipulation of terms she casually agreed. She did not ask for references, but Bloomer passed them out to her. She scanned one or two of them.

"That," he mentioned, "is Mr. Oswald Doty, the philanthropist. Money, but queer business connections. His car was a Cadillac touring after open cars had gone out. I hinted for a new one, but he didn't take it, and so I gave notice."

"Oh?"

"Yes. And Mrs. Phipps-Snoddys. Her personal car was a Pierce-Arrow sedan painted cream and black and upholstered in cream broadcloth. It certainly got an eye when we curved up to a big hotel. She got bitten by the antique bug. It was all right as long as she stuck to glassware, but when she went in for furniture, and we used to turn up on Fifth Avenue with whole beds strapped onto the running-board—well, a traffic-officer put us off the Avenue once, and that was the end for me. . . . This last was the Cowperthwaites. That was my first foreign car; a Knight-engined Panhard."

"And why did you leave them?" she prompted.

"Well, the Cowperthwaites have a daughter," he hesitated. "I don't go with that sort of thing, for a man in my position."

"But mightn't you go farther in the long run?"

"Not a chance—in the long run. Look at the sad tales of chauffeurs who have married rich girls! I've been chauffeur," Bloomer ended, with his nearest approach to humor, "to everything but a title, and some day I'll make that grade. Meantime—I guess I'm pretty well qualified to handle *your* wheel."

Bloomer agreed that he could go to work at once. His room was above the garage, she said, and she led him out to his first view of the successor to Mrs. Cowperthwaite's Knight-engined Panhard. Bloomer stood aghast. It must be her idea of a joke!

But no, she was still looking at him with that improper interest in him as an individual rather than a chauffeur. If she had failed to mention that her Frankard was of the vintage of 1910, it was because she was simply not impressed by the fact. But great suffering Christopher! Bloomer stared at that pile of entertaining junk, that masterpiece of antiquity: spare tires on the running-board; the high, rectangular wind-shield braced with long steel rods; outside crank-handle for the human arm to operate; brass lamps, built carriage style with handles, and set high to sweep the ether rather than the road. . . . The whole turnout done in the toplofty manner of those first horseless vehicles which showed so strongly the coach influence. At the vision of himself taking to the Long Island turnpikes in that comedy of a motor-car, Bloomer's lip curled, his blood chilled. She didn't—she couldn't expect him—*him*——

But she did. She took it quite for granted. "Will it run?" she asked him merrily. "That's the only requisite."

"The uniform," he muttered weakly.

"Uniform? Oh, yes. . . . I should think you might find it in the wardrobe up-stairs. I've rented it, you see, so I'm not quite sure."

"Rented——?"

"Uniform—car—house. For a month or six weeks. It's my spree—*you're* my spree," she laughed.

Left alone, Bloomer subsided onto the

mud-guard of the relic. . . . He'd not go through with it! He'd go now and break it to her . . . well, gently. But he was curiously reluctant. There was something about her . . . her eyes. . . . What-the-deuce color were her eyes? He would notice the next time. It is significant that Bloomer, while he remained strongly aware of her eyes, never did, in all his weeks there, fix their color.

He took it out in a strong complaint concerning the uniform. He carried that in to Miss Tait; showed her the moth-holes at a crucial place in the breeches.

Miss Tait giggled out: "You leave it here. I'll mend it myself. I'll mend it so it never will show—honor bright!"

Bloomer retired. His disapproval was expressed in the reared flatness of his back, the stiff curve of his leather leggings. He did not respect a mistress who showed undue consideration for her servants; he had only scorn for one who would undertake a menial labor for him.

At dinner that night he had the cook's and the angular maid's version of their mistress. They had been rented to this Miss Sally Tait along with the house. Having hoped for a lengthy vacation with pay and been disappointed, they were divided between resentment against their regular employer and loyalty to her in the face of this invader.

Bloomer might have combined with them in disapproval. But they were common creatures of the middle-class kitchens, he decided. He heard them—and snubbed them. "In places where *I've* worked—Mrs. Cowperthwaite's, Mrs. Phipps-Snoddys'—the servants," he stated, "do not hash over their employers." This was certainly far from truth, but it was a good, lofty line.

"Well, I'll be smashed!" said cook. The chop, which she was sawing with both elbows, escaped from her plate. Bloomer rose. He strode straight to the swinging door which led to the dining-room, murmured, "I beg your pardon . . ."

"Come in."

The blinds were partly closed, and she sat in twilight and candle-light. Her dress, of some silver-shot green stuff, was from a second-rate *modiste's*, if not a department store, his experienced eye judged; and the soft blow of light-brown hair with its sliding topknot was anything but coiffured; but her throat and arms had come out a fuller white than he would have expected, and her shoulders took their sleevelessness with an easy, rounded poise. Even Bloomer got the pathos of her little solitary play at swank. Dinner-dresses and service were out of her usual line, he surmised. . . . But, hang it all, if she didn't put on the proper air!

"I'll have to ask for a separate table, madam."

"You mean Celia and cook? You won't eat with them? Why ever not?" She placed her elbows on the table, her chin on her clasped hands, and turned up to him her soft, bright regard.

Bloomer was vaguely uncomfortable. "A chauffeur isn't just ordinary domestic help! Mrs. Cowperthwaite didn't ask us better-class servants to eat with the chambermaids and the kitchen mechanics. It's a distinction which *you* couldn't be expected to——"

"And so you enlighten me. Thank you, Bloomer. I *am* just no end interested. But—you are anxious to keep these artificial barriers of class? You want Mrs. Cowperthwaite to keep to her pedestal. . . . And, in turn, you practise her identical snobbery upon the fellow next below you. It absolutely fits into my theory—that it's not the upper classes so much as the lower classes who insist upon the sharp lines of division. It's not my lady so much as my lady's maid."

She whiffed at the flame of a candle, and the light wavered over her, so that the silver of her gown turned to green, and the green to silver; and on her face the earnestness was shot with mirth, and the mirth with earnestness. "Look, Bloomer! I offer you an interesting experiment in levelling these social barriers! Let's get together! I'm not Mrs. Cowperthwaite, but—will you sit here—now—and have peach cobbler with me?"

"Madam!"

"I hope, Bloomer, that it's nothing personal? I hope you'd turn down Mrs. Cowperthwaite as firmly as you turn down me."

"Madam, you show that you are not of the class that's used to handling servants.

But while you play at being a mistress, you've got to keep up the standards. Anything else is as hard on the help as it is on you—harder."

"Bloomer, I back you out—let's both of us make the supreme effort! Let's you and I eat peach cobbler with Celia and cook! What say? Still no? Oh, very well—wait! Listen, Bloomer, you eat alone—I eat alone—Celia and cook eat alone, if they wish. Four separate tables—and we'll keep up our potty little class distinctions, or we'll bust. That suit you? But I'll tell you this—it's what's wrong with the country—it's what's wrong with the nations. We've got to stop thinking that way before we'll stop being that way— No, wait! There's a window in here that sticks—you can get your strong right arm beneath it. And there's a man named Depew who's written something on *equality* which I intend to read you."

Bloomer stalked after her. He refused a seat, but stood opposite her, with rigid disapproval, while she read on and on. His disapproval wearied at last. He was listening, not to the dull words, but to the soft drift of her voice. Her arms, in that shadow, looked delicately bruised . . . sweet, soft arms, womanly as the argument of her words was not. . . . Once he caught the sneaking glimmer of that girl Celia's face back there in the shadow of the hall—an expression of critical curiosity. Bloomer notched up his slipping disapproval. It wouldn't do—he'd have to step carefully——

But a moon with a flattened side—like a raised goblet of yellow wine just tipped in a toast to the night—was moving up the window, above her green-and-silver shoulder. Miss Tait turned and saw it. She sprang up, and flung down the book. "Come on! I've some night things to do! Two custard-colored hollyhocks to be tied up with string—and the box hedge to be clipped with a giant scissors. . . . Box should always be cut under a moon—did you know that, Bloomer?"

The grass was too long. "Your skirt's in the dew," he muttered; "I'll mow it in the morning."

"No, it's not in the contract. Besides, you couldn't cut it without beheading all the johnny-jump-ups; those pert-looking junior pansies that grow down in the smother of it—have you noticed? And besides—what's the wreck of a skirt and silver slippers in a good cause?"

"Cause?"

"Beauty! . . . Bloomer, my dear, the queerest thing. I stirred up conversation with a junk-dealer this morning—an Oriental Jew, delightful character. His ideas on the market value of beauty——"

"You oughtn't," stated Bloomer with an outer coldness to cover a curious inner warmth, "to be taking up with every Jew ragpicker!"

"I didn't engage you to curtail my personal liberty," she sighed. "Please—please!—don't try to do it; I need every ounce of freedom that I can squeeze into this next month."

But she smiled at him; her eyes merged with his. She lifted her face to the moon, then—lifted her arms as though to rhythm. For a moment Bloomer thought that she was going to dance—and perhaps sing—there in the moonlight. But she did neither. She simply drifted away from him—off by herself across the lawn—with never another word about hedge or hollyhocks.

In the weeks that followed, Bloomer found it very hard to repulse Miss Tait. It was not that she was brazen in her attentions to him, as Noelle Cowperthwaite had been. No, the difficulty seemed to lie in some unexpected softness in Bloomer himself. He grew in a quite personal care of her, a feeling of absolute personal responsibility for her.

Her craziest freaks of conduct he defended before others, though he did not hesitate to indicate his disapproval to Miss Tait herself. If she walked in the rain—and it had only to begin to pour for Miss Tait to climb into a transparent green mackintosh and swing off down the road—Bloomer would vanquish cook and Celia before he limbered up the relic and set after her. He would overtake her when she had done a mile or two. "But I don't want to ride, Bloomer—I want to walk!" she would protest, with the water streaming off her nose, gargoyle fashion.

"It's not a day for walking, madam."

"But I was tramping to the village for ice-cream, Bloomer!"

"I'll drive you to the village for the ice-cream, madam."

Once she eluded him by cutting off

across the fields. She was gone for hours, and returned with the mischief of a child who has been successfully naughty written large on her face. Bloomer maintained, for two days, an attitude of distant reserve toward her after that escapade.

But she eluded him in other more intangible ways. Take this matter of her age. Was she twenty-something—or was she forty-something? Wasn't the girlishness more in her manner, in the slightness of her person, than in any real freshness? . . . Her face had sometimes a soft sag, a worn pallor to it. He was inclined to think that she couldn't be over thirty-three. (Bloomer himself was just thirty.) But he did not know—he did not know anything about her! She told you nothing of any relevance or importance about herself. If she did just mention that a great-grandfather had been governor of Maryland, she dropped it as something trivial; while if she told you how she and her sisters, as children, had dressed up black-eyed Susans in grass skirts to look like Hawaiian dancers, she described that in detail, as though it were an affair of importance. . . .

Their unnatural isolation may have had something to do with it. Usually Bloomer was afforded some outlet in a gossiping, sociable condescension toward members of his own class. Here he was quite cut off. He and Miss Tait were alone, and paired by the criticism of cook and Celia. Miss Tait was as uncompanioned as he was. All that reached her from the outer world was a trickling of letters with the British postmark and bales of papers of a heavy political nature, which swamped her for several days at a stretch. Bloomer came to hate those papers. He came to hate her absorbed reactions: "This question of cancelling the war debt, Bloomer. . . . Hm, League of Nations—what do you think—?" The women whom he had worked for in the past had annoyed him in various ways—had sent him on shopping tours with shreds of silk to match to spools of thread, etc. But no one of them had ever pestered him by soliciting from him opinions of a deep political nature. Bloomer knew suddenly that he loathed and detested government and intellectual interests in a woman. His feeling on the subject was so strong that it amounted to an inner organic stir resembling indigestion.

Mostly Bloomer was able to blink the significance of his own disturbed state. The days ran their gamut of weather moods, from amber sunshine to silver rain; and the wedge of the distant sound ran the gamut of its corresponding color changes, from burning blue to glass gray. Bloomer was companion-gardener, playmate, even—on sundry small occasions—lady's maid, as well as chauffeur, to Miss Tait; and against all his rigid principles, he was strangely acquiescent to the growing intimacy. But a small thing happened one afternoon which made Bloomer suddenly aware of himself.

It was only a glance. Miss Tait, lying in a basket-chair on the lawn, had asked for pillows, and Bloomer had brought them. She submitted herself to Bloomer's arrangement of them, and looking up at him, sighed: "Isn't it funny? You think you want to be lonely, until you are—and then you don't want it any more."

Bloomer, gazing down at her, found himself shaking. He got away from her abruptly. But he was at last forced to recognize the truth: not only had Miss Tait fallen for him, but he, Bloomer, was actually falling for Miss Tait!

There is no need to record the separate contortions of Bloomer's struggle against this revelation. He fought a losing battle. He tried reducing it to the *nays* of sense and logic, but Miss Tait had a way of creeping in between his firmest resolutions. She was within Bloomer's mind like the seep of a fog was within the garden on a pearl-colored morning, obliterating the landmarks; nothing you could do but accept the magic of it. And after all, why not? There was no great barrier between them. She was, so far as Bloomer could determine, just a little spinster leading a solitary life in some corner of the big city. Some small government position, which accounted for her bug on politics. All her relatives living in England. Damned lonely for her, he should think. And why not, then? Bigger women than she had deigned to look romantically at him. She might even have a bit of money; Bloomer rather thought she would have a small, regular income, besides her salary. . . . He en-

deavored to put it on a practical basis, which his common sense could approve. . . . But really, it was not Sally Tait's money, but her eyes. . . . Yes, he was calling her "Sally" in imagination, was figuring in terms of a little apartment for two. . . .

So affairs stood on the day of the tempest. They had started, in mid-afternoon, for a ride and tea. Miss Tait wore the floppy straw hat which was certainly a motoring abomination, and the car-top was down—she insisted upon it—leaving them naked on their high-decker, exposed to ridicule and to a blistering sun. Miss Tait had byway and backwater tastes. Usually they did the side-roads and the stuffy little tea-rooms which no one of any social prominence ever visited. This suited Bloomer. But to-day they stuck to the country roads only long enough for Bloomer to get well muddied from retrieving some large pink flowers from a swamp. Then Miss Tait caught a glimpse of pine woods, and ordered him onto the turnpike. He knew that turnpike well! She next caught a glimpse of an alluring live red macaw, on a screened porch which swung a tea sign, and ordered Bloomer to draw up. Bloomer knew *The Sign of the Red Parrot* too thoroughly.

He wheezed into the half-circle gravel drive. His worst fears were justified. Peter Tumulty, enthroned in the Rolls-Royce which carried that Knox girl who was Miss Cowperthwaite's bosom friend, gaped at the turnout—and recognized Bloomer. . . . Bloomer sat with rigid back, and suffered. . . .

But suddenly—long before the tea interval was over—Miss Tait reappeared on the steps. She was followed by a girl in mushroom pinks—Noelle Cowperthwaite! Miss Tait, in her floppy hat and her dress of some dowdy-looking homespun stuff, stepped briskly down to her remarkable vehicle. She paused to address Bloomer, and he felt that Noelle Cowperthwaite had registered his profile! Miss Tait said: "Start the car, Bloomer, and duck! Quick, will you?"

He was out—not to assist her; she had a careless way of overlooking his proper attentions, anyhow—but to attack that misplaced elbow of a crank-handle. He prayed that the damned bus would start. It did.

He saw that Noelle, who had been standing rather uncertainly, was now running down the steps and calling out to them. Curiously, she seemed intent upon Miss Tait, not upon him.

But they were off in a splutter and a blue cloud of smoke. He knew just the spectacle they made. "Heigh, mister, where'd-cha get the tally-ho?" jeered a boy in a passing flivver. Bloomer would crowd that flivver off the road if it was his last act! He swerved, opened up——

"Let them by!" sang out Miss Tait from the rear. "Take this right road!" Bloomer was sore; she appreciated neither motor form nor motor tactics.

But Miss Tait, it seemed, was engaged in losing the Knox's Rolls-Royce, which was indeed after them. It whizzed by, and Bloomer had seized the next left turning before Tumulty was back on their trail. He failed to comprehend the race, but he did his best. By sunset he had succeeded in losing Tumulty and in losing themselves on a desolate dune road.

The sky was overcast. "But why," said Bloomer, drawing up, "should Miss Cowperthwaite——?"

"That was Miss Cowperthwaite?"

"Yes, madam. Don't you—*do* you know her?"

"Her face—only her face was familiar. I made a Current Events talk once, and they're always hounding me for speeches."

"But was it you—or was it me they were chasing?" he puzzled.

"Oh, that was *you*, Bloomer!" she giggled. "Anyway, we avoided them. And, anyway, it's not I—just the thing I represent that they're after."

"Your organization? You make speeches for your organization?"

"Hm."

Bloomer considered it. He knew Noelle Cowperthwaite's cultural fads and her impetuosities. He knew that she was forever picking up nobodies, and strenuously pursuing them.

"I'm famished for my tea; let's go, Bloomer."

"Yes, madam."

But *Miss Melissa* (it was her name for the relic) chose that darkening hour to refuse to budge. Bloomer cranked—he cranked till he was exhausted. He scrutinized and he tested. "Some part," he

Drawn by James Reynolds.

She lifted her eyes to Bloomer's and considered him. "What is your name?"—Page 731.

reported, "seems to have died a natural death."

"A new part—?" she suggested.

"Where?" He cast his eyes at the heavens, at the undulating, wind-stirred stretch. "Where in town—if we were there? Where in New York itself? She's an orphan, and every nut and bolt in her has gone out. If you knew the insults I've stood from cheap village garage hands!" he said passionately. "Short of luck and a good junk-heap, you'll never replace any part in this bus."

"Cuss, Bloomer—we'll cuss together!" she chuckled. "Is that rain?"

It certainly was rain. Together they reared the top. Then things began to happen. Night swooped upon them in a sudden bruised-purple darkness, with sword-play of lightning and fusillade of wind and rain. The hullabaloo of frogs was swallowed, first in the whinnying rush of the gale, then in the cavernous boom-boom of the adjacent sea. Bloomer was abruptly separated from Sally Tait by torrents of water . . . he could neither see nor hear her. His hand moving down the wet flank of the car, he found her in her rear seat. Without side-curtains, the top was no protection at all. He got his jacket off and about her drenched figure. He made a shelter of his body for her, against the worst force of the storm.

But now there came a particularly vicious, skewery twist of wind . . . a ripping sound . . . and the torrents were from overhead! "Bloomer—what was that?"

"The top!"

"Wh-where is it, Bloomer?"

"God knows, madam," he shouted back. He gathered her into his arms. Minutes passed. He held her tighter, tighter, ostensibly against the demons of weather, really against his own pounding heart. She was talking into his shirt-buttons—Bloomer could feel the movement of her words, but could not hear the sound.

He held her, cherished her, washed by the rain with her and lapped in bliss. . . . Every stab of lightning was registered in a shuddering of her light frame, in the answering tension of Bloomer's firm guardian hold. . . .

Now a lull, and a fragment of her laugh. "—Protection, and all the rest. Why, I'll wager, Bloomer, that you're still maintaining 'Woman's place is in the home'!"

"It is!"

"So! Whereas really woman's place is in the world—in public life—yes, holding office! All that we ask," she said, extricating herself from his grasp, standing, and flinging out her arms to the declining storm, "is a place in the wind—a share in the fight! I'll bet my hat, Bloomer," she laughed, yanking off that wreck, "that you're the most perfect living exponent of the hearthstone theory. Have you a cigarette? Please. . . ."

For no known reason, the drenching seemed to have revived *Miss Melissa*. An hour later, Bloomer, the dominant male in spite of her protests, carried Miss Tait across intervening pools to the house, deposited her in the hall, and ordered a hot dinner and a hot bath for their mistress of the sniggering maids.

Later, Bloomer passed softly through the hallway, and listened up the stairs. He caught a glimpse of his solid figure in the mirror, paused to admire. She'd have to give up her job and all that political nonsense, though—he was determined upon that. Bloomer, regarding himself, knew a satisfaction at the prospect of making her sacrifice her maidenly eccentricities to him.

"Oh, Bloomer! Will you come up here a minute?"

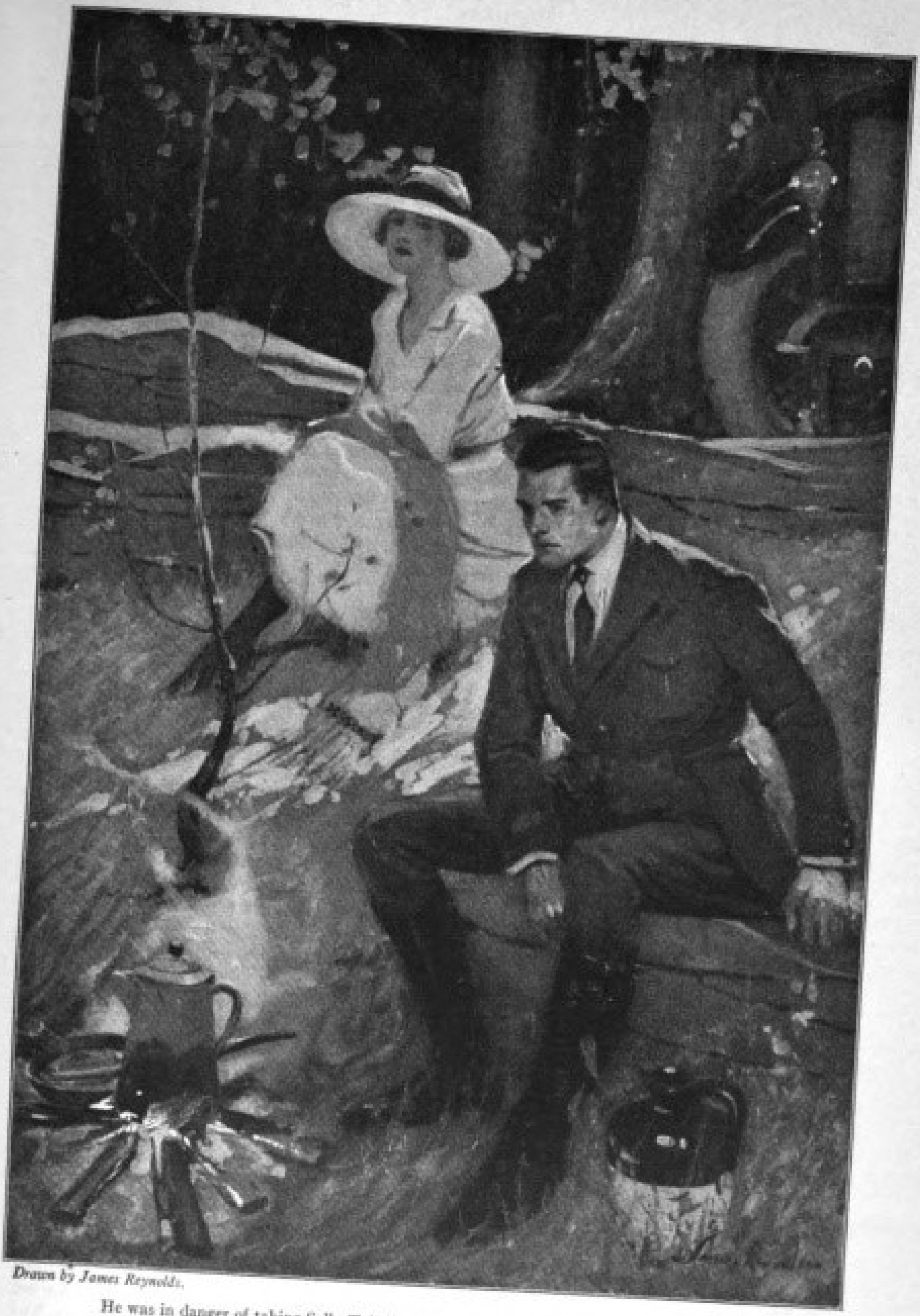
She was in her room, in a silver-gray kimono, at her dressing-table. She was quite casual—as though she had no consciousness of the effect she was having upon Bloomer.

But Bloomer's step was decisive . . . his moment had come. . . .

"Oh, Bloomer. . . . I was just thinking how one doesn't usually get more than one deserves—less sometimes, but seldom more. I didn't thank you for your chivalry—yes, *chivalry*, Bloomer. You deserve—" She dropped into his hand an old heavy ring, with a blood-red stone carved with curious insignia. "I want you to have it. Order of the Knights of the Leather Leggings," she laughed.

"But, madam—Sally——!"

"Madam Sally?—I *like* it! Yes, it's old, Bloomer—very old—older than America. It's English . . . and now you're wondering! But of course I'm



Drawn by James Reynolds.

He was in danger of taking Sally Tait into his arms and declaring himself.—Page 740.

English, too; American by birth, but English by marriage."

"Marriage?" he stammered.

"Yes." She dropped it so lightly that Bloomer could not think she was deliberate, either in her holding back of that vital fact or in her mentioning of it now. "Will you bolt the window on your way down, Bloomer?"

Naturally the information raised in Bloomer's mind a dozen questions. Why the *Miss* Tait? Bloomer eventually decided that she had been divorced, and had resumed her maiden name. This deduction he verified through her. "You are," he hazarded, "a—a widow?" She glanced up, seemed to grasp his perplexities, hesitated. "Grass," she laughed. "By request. Temporary!" That last was certainly a challenge to him! But what did she mean—"By request"? That her husband had divorced her by her request? Bloomer built up an entirely new version of Miss Tait, verified by her manner to him, which had changed not one iota. . . . If she had meant to repulse Bloomer, she would certainly not have continued so familiar with him. But Bloomer wasn't at all sure that he could swallow a divorced husband.

He was still debating the matter when a newspaper reporter at their door threw Miss Tait into a panic, and had to be dealt with personally by Bloomer. The divorce, then, must have been recent. He wondered whether it had been a notorious case; asked Miss Tait the name of her husband, but was put off by her. She told Bloomer that *Miss Melissa* must be got in repair for an immediate jaunt. They set out on the following morning.

While they did a loop of New York State, Bloomer was still debating pro and con. Never in all his closely buttoned, visored, and putteed life had he experienced such a tour. At every hot-dog stand he was against her. Before Ithaca, while he smoked himself together with the bacon over a picnic flame, and Sally Tait, sprawled in the sun, lifted her eyes from the observation of some ants to smile at him, he was unwillingly for her. Beyond Syracuse, when she ordered him to turn his back and stand guard while she took a dip in a certain creek, Bloomer was unconditionally against her. With every mile it was becoming more and more apparent to Bloomer that his infatuation was a folly. But with every mile the fatal attraction was growing on him, until now, at that unmentionable tourist's camp outside of Utica, he was in danger of the first spontaneous, natural act of his life.

He was in danger of taking Sally Tait into his arms and declaring himself. The shelter was a tent—$1.00 per night—and Bloomer, casting his eyes over the litter of common and very adjacent neighbors, had insisted upon sitting guard on Miss Tait's tent platform while she slept. But the snores had entertained that lady, and some time after midnight she had come out to share with Bloomer the view of stars and of a pair of masculine bare feet protruding from a canvas lean-to. She sat on the plank next to his and, arms hugging her kimono-clad knees, rocked herself. . . . "Big dipper, little dipper, milky way. . . . I'd like to tickle them, Bloomer."

"What, madam?" he said in a queer, strained voice. So little she was, and so close to him. . . . She had probably led a damned hard life. . . . Some brute of an Englishman. . . .

"Feet. Micky," she dropped, "*would* tickle them."

"Micky?"

"My son."

"You have—a son!"

"I have Millicent, Michael, and Cynthia. Five, seven, and ten apiece. Years," she added.

"You have three children! But where——?"

"They are in a summer-camp," she yawned.

Whether Bloomer could have swallowed three children, as well as a divorced husband, is certainly a question. But in the Catskills, Sally Tait did a thing which evoked his final and decisive judgment against her. She had drummed up acquaintance with a rural character, who lived in solitary bachelordom in the vilest, shabbiest-looking hut which Bloomer had ever laid eyes upon. Bloomer had posted himself, after dark, on the platform of her tent, naturally supposing that she was within. All through the night he had maintained tender guard, dropping off only once or twice. At gray dawn he had discovered that she was absent. And at

sunrise she had come stumbling in, escorted by her disreputable friend. The man's cow, she explained, had been having a calf, and she had stayed to help. . . . Afterward, they had got to swopping stories. . . . By the clear light of the morning Bloomer saw the utter impossibility of his taking on a wife like that. He gave notice, and he left on the day of their return to the shingle cottage.

Two weeks later Bloomer was purring down a certain Long Island turnpike at the helm of Mrs. Llewelyn Smedburg's town car. The car was a Hispano-Suiza done in battleship gray. It had embellishments which included the trumpet-horn, the Minerva wind-shield, the Shin-o spot-light, gray-monogrammed robes to match his gray-monogrammed livery, etc.; and it had a cold market value of $18,000. In short, it was the king of all the cars which Bloomer had ever driven.

As a mistress, Mrs. Smedburg suited him exactly. She had whims, but they were proper whims. She treated Bloomer with the curt indifference which he preferred. If she was exacting and petulant about jolts, she was also not incognizant of his footman's form and of his expert driving technic. . . . His art of crowding out, tootling aside, and dusting down all lesser traffic . . . fumes he left behind him, like a thumbed nose . . . his flourish for all *porte-cochères* . . . his expression of aloofness to the luxury which he piloted, matching so perfectly his mistress's mien of yawning indifference. . . . These first-class attributes of a superior chauffeur, Mrs. Smedburg (whose wealth was fairly recent) did not overlook.

On this particular day Bloomer had succeeded in gassing every car on the road, when a comical, toplofty old vehicle with the figure of a stage-coach careened into his path. He slowed—he had to. It was she, floppy hat and all. Nothing about the ignominious turnout which was not familiar to Bloomer, except the driver, a mere boy, whose hair—in the absence of a cap—was roughened by the wind.

Bloomer sounded three musical notes on his trumpet-horn. The old bus edged over. For three minutes Bloomer ran abreast of them—long enough for her to recognize him and to register his full splendor. Not by a single facial muscle did he acknowledge her proximity. Then he opened up, and with a fine smooth whish he left them.

"Stop!" It was Mrs. Smedburg, through the speaking-tube.

Bloomer drew up. "That car we just passed—turn and follow it!"

He turned, but *Miss Melissa* had vanished. A road to the right—Bloomer knew full well the jack-rabbit chase she would lead them. But blank ignorance seemed his best cue.

"But where—? Oh, you stupid!" stormed Mrs. Smedburg. "I met her personally in London once, and I'd have every excuse to follow up——"

"If it's not presuming, madam, what is the name she went by then?"

"Name? Why, Bloomer, you utter blockhead! That's Lady Sally Hepburne, the famous M. P. Her name and her face are in every paper. She's summering down here somewhere—incognito, of course——"

"What," asked Bloomer, "is M. P.?"

"Member of Parliament," snapped Mrs. Smedburg.

She was featured in the rotogravure section of Bloomer's Sunday paper when she sailed for England. Standing on the deck of the *Aquitania*, she was surrounded by her three children and her husband. . . . A mild-looking man, who had Bloomer's sympathy. . . . Wispy, stringy-looking children. . . .

Several days later Bloomer had a note from her, in care of Mrs. Smedburg:

"My dear Bloomer,

"I want to thank you for protecting me from your Mrs. S. that day. And I want you to reconsider my offer to write you a reference. I am enclosing my best.

Sincerely yours,
Sally Tait Hepburne."

The reference was written on paper with an embossed silver crest. It was the same device which was engraved on the blood-red stone of the ring which she had given him. In changing positions thereafter, Bloomer exhibited both ring and reference to his prospective employer. My lady's car had been an American Frankard. . . . He failed to mention the vintage of the vehicle.